

Earthquake prompts inspections, FEMA missions, air sampling, talk and counseling



Forty-five seconds of shaking seemed like eternity. Federal Center South in Seattle rattled and rumbled to an Ash Wednesday earthquake with a magnitude of 6.8. Seattle District employees had already talked about a recent seismic study of their historic office building, built by Henry Ford in 1928. Would this be the big one? Thankfully, the riveted steel frame building performed as designed and predicted.

"What an experience. I'm sitting there, drinking my tea, when the wall started banging," said Steve Cosgrove in the Public Affairs Office. "Before I could say 'what the....', a piece of tile hit me on the head. No damage - it was my head," he quipped. "The wall and windows were shaking violently. The floor started pulsating. I dove under the desk until the shaking subsided - it seemed like forever - thinking to myself, 'something like this could kill you.' As soon as it stopped, I grabbed my Palm top, checked to see if a coworker was OK (she was already gone), and headed for the door at a quick clip.

"Jeez, that building shook and groaned like a constipated elephant."

Fortunately, all 600 employees escaped, as a stray file cabinet and bookcase toppled, plaster fell and bricks cracked, and ceiling tiles left black caverns throughout the block-long GSA building where the Corps is prime tenant.

GSA closed the building initially, but Corps structural engineers (including Jim Ryan, Hank Payne, Norm Skjelbreia, Alan Smith and Jim Skrinde) examined the building exterior, the foundation, the roof and known critical connections throughout along with expansion joints, pipes and stairwells to determine safe occupancy. These structural experts were teamed with GSA mechanical engineers and electricians, who were very familiar with buildings' features and hazards. By that evening the building was determined to be safe to reoccupy the following morning and GSA-contracted cleaning crews arrived to work through the night to dust and vacuum and replace fallen ceiling tiles. Returning workers were astonished at how well the office areas had been returned to pre-earthquake condition.

The district sent representatives immediately to the FEMA Regional Operations Center and State EOC – as Northwestern Division Representatives to begin planning the necessary emergency services support. Special facilities with computers were set up for a multi-Corps-organization task force for one of six evolving FEMA missions. The task force, coordinated by project manager Alan Coburn, was to perform verification and valuation of damage to publicly owned buildings in the disaster area, to include

THE KING COUNTY COURTHOUSE. SEATTLE DISTRICT'S EOC STANED UP FOR EARTHQUAKE OPERATIONS.

"We also responded to the Shoalwater tribe's request for flood control assistance," said Arill Berg, Chief, Emergency Management. "Eric Winters and his team placed a 1,500-foot protective berm along the coast to protect the tribal center and other reservation assets.

"We also offered help to Fort Lewis and inspected several reserve centers for the 70th Reserve Support Center. We provided four structural engineers to FEMA and our Native American coordinator," he added. In addition, employees began inspecting facilities at McChord Air Force Base, south of Tacoma, near the epicenter.

With many Seattleites attempting to make phone calls and cellular towers out of service, few calls got in or out. Dutch Meier, Chief, Public Affairs, Walla Walla District, patched into Seattle workers at home and at projects. Homes became temporary offices enabling a back-channel news release draft to be sent to Walla Walla. Meier and his staff changed logos to Seattle District and dispatched the news that operating projects functioned with "business as usual." Updates appeared on Seattle District's strategic web.

Ernie Gomez, dam safety officer, headed for nearby Mud Mountain and Howard Hanson Dams with teams of experts.

"On-site forces implemented their respective post earthquake response inspection procedures. Within hours of the event, additional Dam Safety Team Inspections were also conducted," Gomez reported. Experts from the Waterways Experiment Station came in to participate. "Lake Washington Ship Canal and Mud Mountain Dam did not experience any dam safety related damage. Howard Hanson Dam did experience fine cracks at the crest, right abutment parking area and on the upstream face access road and the strong motion instrument housing moved about four inches upstream," Gomez said. He concluded after the on-site inspection of Hanson that the cracks were cosmetic in nature, and the dam behaved as expected and the project was safe for continued operation.

Two shallow trenches were excavated on the dam crest to study the cracks. The cracks were found, as expected, to be shallow and were caused by the density variations in the underlying soil/gravel/rock materials, utility lines and utility trench.

Seattle District Commander Col. Ralph Graves led a Town Hall by week's end. Structural engineers gave employees a grass-roots perspective, GSA discussed air sampling completed to date, and employees offered suggestions for further testing.

Larry Senechal, Chief, Civilian Personnel Advisory Center, passed out brochures on the Employee Assistance Program offering counseling on earthquake concerns and emotions to frazzled workers.